

Excerpt from *William A. Gissberg: An Oral History*

Bill Gissberg, a Democrat from the 39th District, was elected to the Washington State Senate in 1952 and served for twenty years. As a member and eventual chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee, Senator Gissberg's legal background and attention to detail helped him to provide strong leadership. During the redistricting battles of the 1960s his strong sense of principle almost caused a federal judge to declare him in contempt of the court. The entire text of [William A. Gissberg: An Oral History](#) is available on the Oral History Program's Web site.

Ms. Boswell: Let me ask you about a whole different area of issues. And that is redistricting. I know that redistricting was a big issue at various times during your career, although I suppose, most particularly, in the early-to-mid-sixties. Tell me a little bit about the whole redistricting issue.

Mr. Gissberg: As far as the Senate was concerned, Bob Greive was the leader on redistricting matters. He did an outstanding job on it, in my opinion. I came from a rural district, as I said, and I believed in the federal system, i.e., that in the federal system, as everyone knows, the US Senate is given two senators—each state is given two US senators, regardless of population. And I felt that the federal system could be imposed upon our state government as well as the federal government. So, it was always a struggle to get any kind of redistricting legislation passed. As a matter of fact, we hadn't done so for twenty years, although the state Constitution requires it to be done every ten years after the federal census was taken. It was always a struggle, a bitter struggle, not only between the Republicans and Democrats, because



William A. Gissberg

whoever won was going to control the Legislature, it was also a struggle among the Democrats themselves, as to who was going to get what portion of the new territory depending upon whether it was Democratically oriented or Republican oriented. It could effect or create a victory, whichever way the bill went.

We had a federal district court judge by the name of Beeks who was reputedly Scoop Jackson's campaign treasurer. Jackson had him appointed to the federal district court. Beeks, at the request of the League of Women Voters, issued an order prohibiting the Legislature from passing any legislation, except an appropriation bill, until the redistricting was accomplished. He also entered an order saying that when the redistricting bill passed, that the newly elected senators would serve only one year.

That incensed me, so I wrote Beeks a letter and pointed out that I was sworn to uphold the Constitution of the state of Washington and that the state provided for four-year terms for senators, state senators. I said I agreed with everything else that he ruled upon, but I was going to disregard his order and urge my fellow senators to do likewise, which I did. I wrote to all the senators and the governor and, needless to say, I wasn't in good grace with Beeks.

He wrote me back a letter and said, "Sir. You are in contempt of this court, and I shall take it up with my colleagues and see what your punishment shall be." I got a hold of Scoop Jackson, who was my friend, and the judge never punished me. I don't know whether Scoop did anything or not, but I presume that he did. I was never held in contempt of the federal court.

Ms. Boswell: It was a threat, but nothing ever materialized?

Mr. Gissberg: No. Probably because we passed legislation that met the federal test of one man, one vote.

Greive would use that as a lever to reward his friends and punish his enemies. Probably "enemies" is the wrong term to use. I don't think it was ever that strong, but those that disagreed with Greive...

Ms. Boswell: You mean he'd use redistricting—

Mr. Gissberg: As a weapon. To punish or reward his friends and those who opposed him.

Ms. Boswell: Did you see that as appropriate?

Mr. Gissberg: I didn't butt into it. I just looked to see what my district looked like. That's what everybody did when the redistricting bill came out. They looked to see what precincts you inherited or subtracted, and you'd know what precincts were liable to hurt you or help you, so it was every man for himself. So, those who were hurt were mostly people who hadn't supported Greive for one reason or another.

[The redistricting story continues after a discussion about Senator Greive]

Ms. Boswell: ...Going back to redistricting for a minute, you said it was the League of Women Voters that really prompted Judge Beeks.

Mr. Gissberg: I don't think they prompted Judge Beeks to do that, but the League of Women Voters were in the forefront and pushing for a redistricting bill. The first redistricting bill. That was one of their projects that they wanted done, because the rural areas were overrepresented in the Legislature as contrasted with the urban areas, contrary to the provisions of what the US Supreme Court had already ruled in its only redistricting case, where it enunciated the state rule of one man, one vote. That trees and farms were not entitled to be represented, only people.

Ms. Boswell: How had that imbalance come about?

Mr. Gissberg: Because it's so difficult for a legislative body to draw lines for its own members, because of the inherent conflict between members and parties. It was very difficult to get done, so consequently, it wasn't done, although the mandate of the state Constitution provided that it had to be. So the League of Women Voters took that as one of their issues that had to be done, to pass redistricting. They did it.